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**PRACTICE REPORT:** for distribution and discussion

What does pastoral supervision look like for Incumbents in the Diocese of  
Newcastle?

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**Introduction:** The purpose of the report is to share findings from a qualitative research study aimed at understanding the experiences of Incumbents, and what they would find useful in maintaining personal lives and professional ministry within the Diocese of Newcastle.



Figure 1: word cloud representing respondents' views around pastoral supervision

According to Shohet (2011), pastoral supervision can be transformative, enabling one to reconnect with their core motivations, values and beliefs. Practically-speaking, pastoral supervision is a meeting between two or more people with the intent to provide a space where one is supported to reflect and develop skills, drawing on a wide range of resources (Leach & Paterson, 2015). For this reason, the Diocese of Newcastle engaged researchers at the University of Sunderland to complete a qualitative study aimed at the Incumbents of the Diocese, to explore what pastoral supervision looks like to those who would access the proposed provision, what experiences they have had and what they would find constructive in a proposed new scheme of supervision.

**Research Aim:** The aim of this research project is to explore what pastoral supervision looks like, according to the voices of those who would receive it (Deacon. 2022) i.e. the Incumbents. The aim is to explore and understand what Incumbents in the Diocese of Newcastle would find helpful in supporting them in their duties to maintain a balance between their personal and work lives. The research will consider both pragmatic considerations for supervision, as well as conceptual ones related to wellbeing and emotional support for Incumbents.

**Research question:** What does pastoral supervision look like for Incumbents in the Diocese of Newcastle and what would Incumbents find beneficial to support them in balancing their personal and work lives?

**Participants:** There were a total of 33 respondents who completed the survey, and all identified as Incumbents in the Diocese of Newcastle. Those who did not tick the final question 'happy to submit answers' were withdrawn from analysis.

**Methodology:** A comprehensive qualitative survey was designed (including closed questions for background information) following extensive consultation to ensure the appropriateness and accuracy of questions. These had been sensitively prepared and feedback on the wording had been received from the Diocesan Director and colleagues. A Qualtrics survey link was distributed to the Incumbents of the Diocese of Newcastle via the administrative gateway at the Diocese office. The survey provided a space where Incumbents could anonymously share their views, suggestions and experiences. The method of using a self-completion survey not only provides the potential for richness and depth in the diversity of experience and perspective but is also free from interviewer influence (Braun et al, 2021).

**Ethics:** Ethical approval was sought and received from the University of Sunderland Research Ethics Committee (application: 029542) on 1 December 2024, as the academic host of the research.

**Limitations:** Due to unforeseen circumstances, the distribution of the survey needed to be postponed until after the Christmas period. Subsequently, time limitations meant that the distribution of the survey could only remain open from the 17<sup>th</sup> January – 7<sup>th</sup> February 2025. Whilst the survey was able to gather 33 responses, a longer time period may have been beneficial in gathering further voices and increasing representativeness of the Incumbents.

**Data Analysis:** Thematic analysis as a method is beneficial in identifying common ideas, patterns of association, quotes, phrases and themes of behaviour, from individual surveys and comparing them to others (Braun and Clarke, 2006). By using Braun and Clarke’s (2013), six stages of thematic analysis: familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up themes; a total of five themes and three geographical summaries were identified.

**Findings:** Of the thirty-three participants, sixteen identified as female and fifteen as male with two whom did not respond. The majority of respondents identified their church as being located in a Suburban geographical location (42%, n=13), followed closely by Rural (39%, n=12) and finally the smallest group being Urban (19%, n=6). A combined 50% of respondents ‘probably’ or ‘definitely’ had prior knowledge of pastoral supervision before becoming an Incumbent, and 47% of respondents continue to have experiences of pastoral supervision outside of the Diocese of Newcastle whilst 53% do not.

How long have you held your current post? 32 ①

Q1 - How long have you held your current post?	Percentage	Count
Less than 1 year	13%	4
1-2 years	6%	2
3-5 years	28%	9
5-10 years	38%	12
More than 10 years	16%	5

Table 1: Respondents’ time held in current post

The majority of respondents had held their post as an Incumbent for 5–10 years (38%, n=12), followed by 3–5 years (28%, n=9). Only two respondents held there post for 1–2 years and four for less than a year.

What is your age 32 ⓘ

Q2 - What is your age	Percentage	Count
31-40	19%	6
41-50	13%	4
51-60	38%	12
61-70	28%	9
71-80	3%	1

Table 2: Respondents age by age bands

The majority of respondents were between the ages of 51–60 (38%, n=12), followed by 61–70 (28%, n=9). The minority representation of voices came from those between 71–80 (3%, n=1) and 41–50 (13%, n=4).

In your opinion should pastoral supervision be on a 1-to-1 basis or in a group format? 32 ⓘ

Q17 - In your opinion should pastoral supervision be on a 1-to-1 basis or in a group format? - Selected Choice	Percentage	Count
1-to-1	75%	24
Group	6%	2
Both	16%	5

Table 3: How pastoral supervision should be delivered

From the options of 1-to-1, group setting or both options for pastoral supervision it is clear that the majority chose 1-to-1 supervision at 75%. When asked to explain the reasoning behind this choice positive remarks were made regarding the potential of peer support from group supervision however, the answer was almost invariably due to confidentiality to encourage openness in a setting which may not necessarily be managed in a group format.

How much do you agree with the following statements? 32 ⓘ

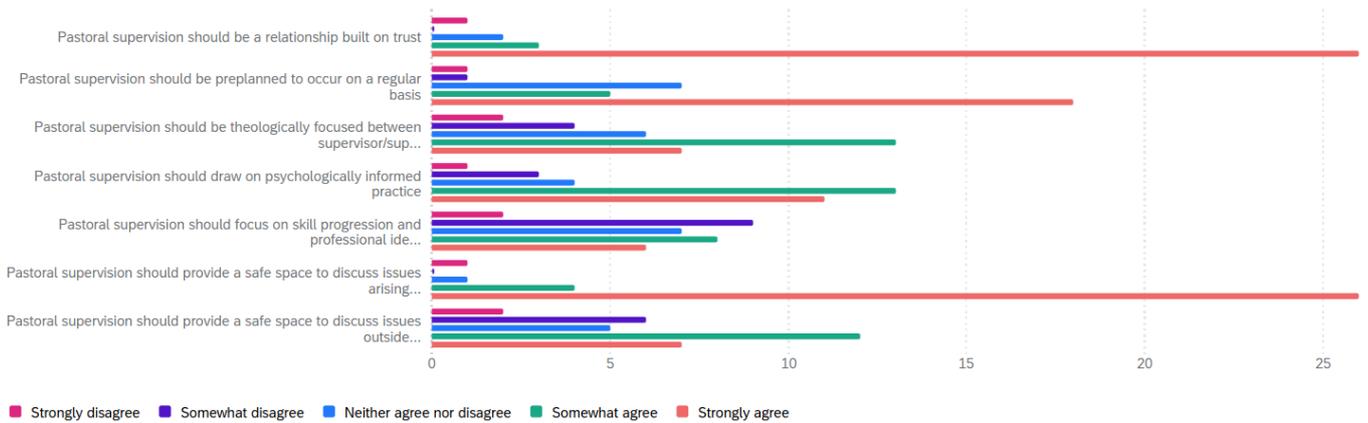


Figure 1: Bar chart showing how likely respondents are to agree or disagree to statements using a 5-point scale

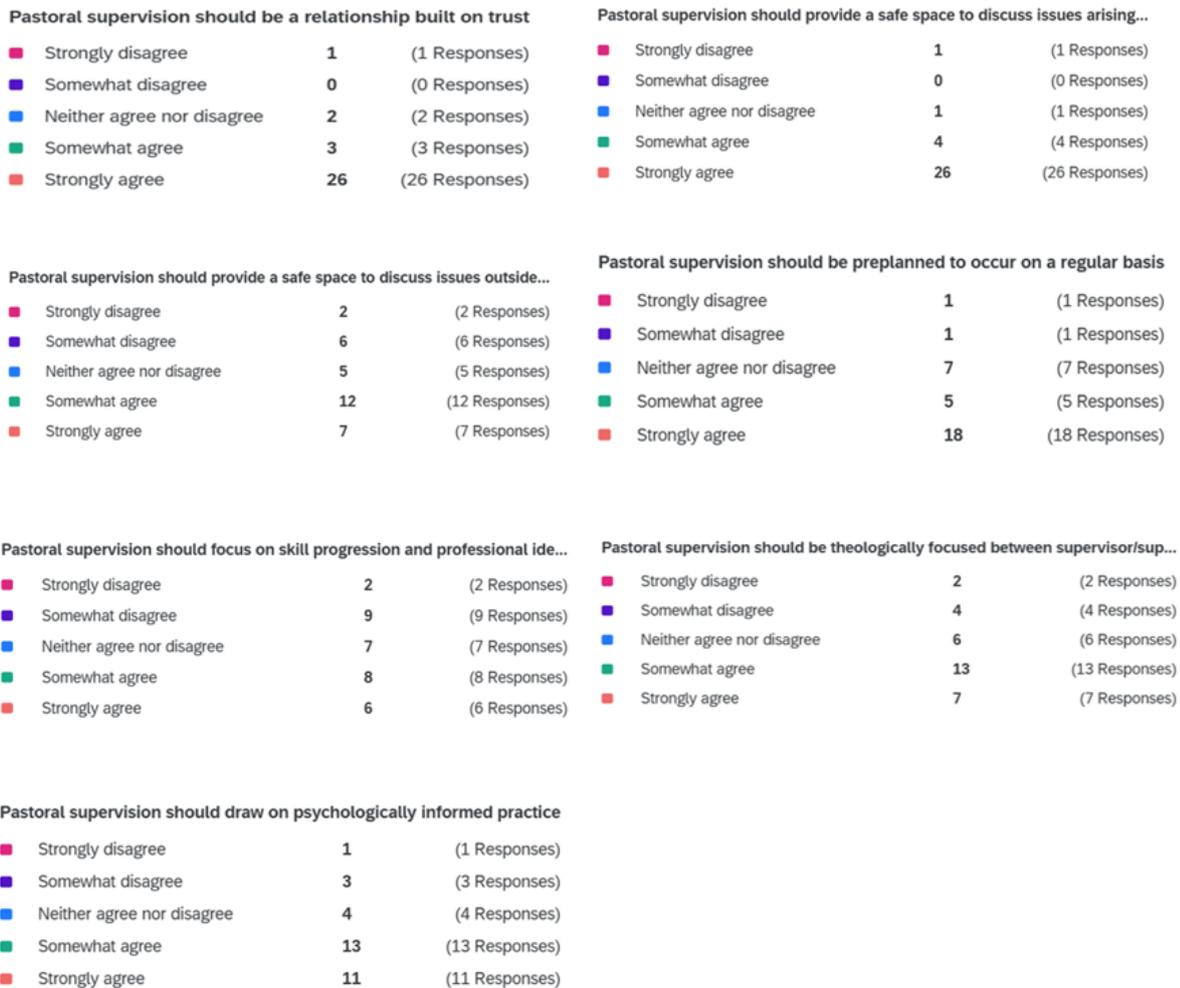


Figure 2: Views on Pastoral supervision

From figure 1 and 2 above, the statements most strongly agreed with were *“Pastoral supervision should be a relationship built on trust”* and *“Pastoral supervision should provide a safe space to discuss issues arising around the supervisee’s work,”* each receiving 26 responses. This recurring emphasis which repeats throughout the themes discussed below, suggests that having a protected space where Incumbents can share in confidence is a top priority. Furthermore, 11 respondents strongly agreed that *“Pastoral supervision should draw on psychologically informed practice,”* with an additional 13 somewhat agreeing, making a combined total of 24. However, three respondents somewhat disagreed. This theme is explored further in Theme Four, which discusses what professionally-informed practice should look like. The variation in responses may reflect a tension between expectations of church-based support as opposed to a more formal structure of a counselling session. In either case, there was a consistent call for the practice to be professionally informed in order to maintain appropriate professional detachment.

There were 18 respondents who strongly agreed that *“Pastoral supervision should occur on a regular basis,”* increasing to 23 when including those who somewhat agreed. However, seven respondents neither agreed nor disagreed. As discussed in the *Geographic Summaries*, this view was more contested among respondents from suburban churches, where there was concern that regular supervision could become a mandatory exercise without meaningful outcomes. A similarly varied response was observed regarding the statement *“Pastoral supervision should be theologically focused between supervisor and supervisee.”* This received the highest number of “somewhat agree” responses (13), along with seven who strongly agreed and four who somewhat disagreed. Respondents from suburban and urban areas were more likely to see theological focus as a key component of pastoral supervision, while those from rural areas tended to view it as something that should remain flexible and adaptable.

Regarding the statement, *“Pastoral supervision should provide a safe space to discuss issues outside of their work,”* 12 respondents somewhat agreed, seven strongly agreed, while six somewhat disagreed and two strongly disagreed. This suggests that discussing personal matters in pastoral supervision is not a high priority for some incumbents, who may prefer to focus solely on professional practice.

Conversely, the greatest level of disagreement was seen in response to the statement, “Pastoral supervision should focus on skill progression and professional identity.” While six respondents strongly agreed and eight somewhat agreed, nine somewhat disagreed and two strongly disagreed. Although this appears to contrast with the preference for a focus on professional practice, Theme 2 further explores this as a call for the process to be led by the supervisee—ensuring it does not become overly task-focused or imposed upon incumbents.

**Theme 1, Confidentiality and Trust:** This is a predominant theme with over half (n=20) of respondents mentioning confidentiality or related words throughout, to questions pertaining to ‘what the role of a pastoral supervisor should be’, how it should be ‘conducted’ and ‘what should be included within supervision’. This is conveyed with terms relating to environment and person/s involved with pastoral supervision with comments such as: “A protected space in which there is a meeting of supervisor” (F, 61-70yo), or “Someone we can, confidentially, discuss concerns and situations within parish life” (F, 51-60yo). However, the significance of concerns amongst the majority of participants can be summarized in the following:

*This should be a time and space for an individual to reflect on their thought, feelings, position, wellbeing, in order that they may flourish in their work role. Largely confidential between individual and the senior 'leader', unless there are any concerns for safety, safeguarding etc (F, 51-60yo)*

As illustrated in Table 3, many respondents (75%) felt that 1-to-1 settings were preferable to group settings, as they reduced the risk of trust being broken in a larger group context. One respondent emphasised the importance of building trust even in 1-to-1 interactions: “provided that a clear basis for trust, accountability and safeguarding is established, a 1-to-1 format would be preferable” (M, 31-40yo). This sentiment reflects a broader concern among respondents that group settings might limit openness, restrict freedom of expression, and compromise the sense of safety that one-to-one formats offer.

Subtheme 1.1, Structure and Boundaries: This theme interconnects with Theme one due to it potentially providing the groundwork needed for building trust and preventing misunderstanding which may contribute to the perception in breaches of confidentiality and distrust. For example, a participant states “Clear boundaries of confidentiality” (F, 31-40yo) is part of the process of forming trust in the pastoral supervision process, which is also echoed by “respecting boundaries and confidentiality” (F, 51-60yo) for the same question. The understanding of the structure and boundaries of pastoral supervision would offer clarity in professionalism and responsibilities of confidentiality within supervision, as demonstrated in the sentiment of following:

*slowly and deliberately by getting to know one another, by the professional conduct of the supervisor, by a clear understanding of the "rules of engagement" and a demarkation of what can/will be discussed (F, 41-50yo)*

In contrast, some respondents have felt there has not been a clear structure or distinction in who is responsible, which has left potential for “misunderstood expectations; over reliance on another” (F, 61-70yo). Similarly, the reliance on someone else including oneself, due to structure is echoed again with “There isn't a clear structure, it is very much do it yourself” (F, 61-70yo). Conversely, there is a perceived potential the build on renewal of trust by forming informative boundaries, as exemplified by the following respondents quote, “Explaining what will happen with any information shared” (F, 41-50yo).

**Theme 2, Reflection**: Pastoral supervision is seen by participants as a space for reflection. This may consist of tools or aids to assist with reflection, in the sense that it may benefit from further insights and be pragmatic and find solutions. Respondents differed slightly on how reflection should be practiced, with those belonging to Rural and Urban areas feeling it should be more prayer or theologically informed as illustrated by the following quote: “time for reflection through silent, and/or spoken prayer...space given for God to speak” (F, 61-70yo). Conversely, Suburban areas were more inclined towards peer support, exemplified in the following: “Supportive peer reflection [...] Being heard and given time and space to articulate, work through and reflect upon situations and circumstances” (M 41-50).

*But what I find useful is the space to talk about what is bothering me in church life, or just to think and reflect out loud. Space to think this through, direction to potentially helpful resources or people, and a regular time are the things I am benefitting from at the moment (M 41-50yo)*

A few respondents felt that this time and space should be led by the supervisee, to ensure it does not become an imposition, overly task-focused, or driven by the supervisor's agenda. This suggests that advice would be welcomed, provided it is offered rather than imposed, as demonstrated in the following quotes: "Supervisors should offer (but not impose) structured frameworks in which these reflections can take place" (F 31-40yo), "the incumbent remains responsible for their progress but the supervisor assists with some direction" (F 51-60yo).

**Theme 3, Being heard:** This theme pertains to being heard, acknowledged, validated or the supervisor actively listening. "Over a period of time, knowing that it is a space where the supervisee is valued and listened to" (M, 31-40). This is often referred to by respondents as space where guidance and support is given in response to the 'attentive' listening that has been practiced. In 25% of instances, respondents felt this should be related to a 'well-being' check. For example, "To regularly check, encourage, and help enable the wellbeing of the individual" (F, 51-60). In the majority of cases where being listened to/being heard had been referred to, it had almost always concomitantly been referred to alongside a 'purpose'. The purpose varies in responses from being heard as illustrated: "Good listening, suggestions offered from the supervisor that are practical and allow for progress in the situations discussed" (F, 51-60yo). Furthermore, whether that purpose is gathering insight from another's perspective, gaining wisdom, gaining access to resources or signposting is again summarised in the following.

*More than a listening ear – also a means of communicating from ground up into the Diocesan structures issues of morale, motivation, need for supportive resources, to encourage openness and accountability (F, 61-70yo)*

There are concerns regarding the imposition of time and lack of productivity from the respondents such as: "That it becomes just another way of talking about things rather than

actually making changes” (F, 61-70yo), and “It needs to help me develop, grow, be confident in my ministry and do things well, without taking up too much time” (F, 41-50yo).

**Theme 4, Professional Practice:** The majority of respondents felt having professional input would improve trust and promote a positive experience. This had been referred to with regard to either a professional training, or mentoring those who wish to become supervisors, or professionals as supervisors themselves. The sentiment of having a professional standard involved was seen to bring assurances of accountability, insights and detachment so they “are not afraid to identify "issues" that need action” (F, 61-70yo). This also mitigates against “Feeling not judged/watched/inspected” (F, 51-60yo). However, what this should look like does differ amongst the respondents. There is an equal spread of respondents feeling this should be either someone experienced in the “structures or church life” (M, 41-50), compared with those who “think there are many aspects of psychology that could benefit clergy in their delivery and would like to see [...] trauma informed pastoral care” (F, 31-40yo). Finally, those who believe it should be distinct from counselling as illustrated in the following: “yes, within clear definition as distinctive from therapy or counselling” (F, 61-70).

**Theme 5, Isolation:** On average male respondents were more likely to report concern for, or witnessing of isolation. For example, when asked ‘Have you ever witnessed or experienced isolation within the diocese? If so, what do you think could be implemented to avoid this?’ one respondent answered “Often” (M, 51-60yo). When elaborating on potential causes of such instances of isolation, geographical distance, a lack of peer support and potential bullying were the main causes as illustrated in the following: “I have witnessed colleagues experiencing isolation. Perhaps a better support for clergy well being and peer support groups” (M, 31-40yo). With regard to the potential for bullying, this is said to have the potential to come from all positions as demonstrated in the following “Proper episcopal care of clergy, where responsibilities are properly discussed rather than as happens at present we have an autocratic, dictatorial, and even bullying culture from the top...”(M, 71-80). However, when discussing plausible solutions to isolation, ‘team facilitators’ or ‘another role’ was often

mentioned in creating support networks alongside encouraging understanding as demonstrated in the following.

*There are little opportunities other than chapter to meet colleagues and if your chapter is small or difficult there is often no one to engage with in thinking and reflecting on your role. I think there should be a team of facilitators to draw on in the diocese to work with PCC's and congregations in planning and in thinking about the shape of ministry as our clergy and volunteer numbers decline (F, 31-40)*

Notably, the concept of a pastoral supervisor was referred to often as a provision that could help mitigate against this issue as shown in the following quote “yes of course. Pastoral supervision is a good thing to help reduce that, but I think it is largely down to us to be adults and find a support network” (M 41-50yo).

**Geographic Summaries:** There were distinct differences in perceptions of pastoral supervision based on geographic location which are set out below.

Rural Incumbents: would prefer a confidential safe space for reflective growth with resources and signposting. It should be adaptive and pragmatic. They have concerns over power structures, it being used as a form of surveillance and breaking of confidentiality. Reassurances to this are the use of outside professionals with training and experience potentially counselling informed who are detached. This would be useful in overcoming isolation which has been witnessed by this demographic and helping with the work/life balance. There has been one dispute here worth to mention as it is not common but another demographic has mentioned also, that it should be handled in-house by the chapters.

Suburban Incumbents: would like a confidential safe space where what needs to be explored is explored but is theologically informed and there is a level of accountability. They want a supportive environment where they will be listened to for a wellbeing check and for further signposting. Overall, they have more concerns of this becoming a mandatory surveillance exercise where support is ‘lip service’ and will be too time consuming without positive results. Isolation has been witnessed most by this demographic and reassurances to address this include empathetic experienced/qualified counselling/trauma informed professionals.

However, there is a rare but notable dispute here: that outside professionals may not fully understand their specific needs and could be perceived as holding a position of power and authority.

Urban Incumbents: would like a theologically informed reflective space for constructive feedback. Their main concern is to be listened to in a confidential space. There are some concerns of it being practiced by people with limited experience or it becoming task focused in an unstructured environment with little resources which means challenges are unable to be tackled and no changes are made. Reassurance would consist of more resources, including the 'need for others' and better structures.

**Recommendations:** Based on analysis of the data shared by Incumbents the following recommendations are made.

1. **Enhance Confidentiality and Trust:** Research highlights the importance of confidentiality and trust in pastoral supervision. It is recommended to establish clear boundaries and rules of engagement to ensure a protected space for individuals to discuss their concerns and situations. This can be achieved through 1-to-1 sessions where trust, accountability, and safeguarding are prioritized.
2. **Structured Supervision:** Implementing a clear structure and boundaries in pastoral supervision can help in the building of trust and potentially prevent misunderstandings. This includes defining the responsibilities and professional conduct of the supervisor, as well as explaining what will happen with any shared information.
3. **Reflective Practices:** Pastoral supervision should include reflective practices that are either prayer or theologically informed, especially for those in rural and urban areas. For suburban areas, supportive peer reflection is recommended. Providing space for individuals to articulate, work through, and reflect upon situations can be beneficial.
4. **Active Listening and Support:** Supervisors should actively listen and provide guidance and support in response to the concerns raised by individuals. Regular well-being checks and practical suggestions can help individuals feel valued and supported.

Ensuring that the supervision process leads to actual changes and development is crucial.

5. **Professional Input:** Incorporating professional input in pastoral supervision can potentially improve trust and promote a positive experience. This can include professional training for supervisors, mentoring, or having professionals as supervisors themselves. The involvement of professionals can bring accountability, insights, and detachment, which are essential for effective supervision.
6. **Addressing Isolation and Bullying:** The research highlighted potential concerns about isolation and bullying. It is recommended to provide proper episcopal care and create supportive networks to address these issues. Facilitators can be appointed to work with PCCs and congregations to plan and think about the shape of ministry as clergy and volunteer numbers decline.

These recommendations aim to create a supportive and effective pastoral supervision environment that addresses the concerns and needs of individual Incumbents in the Diocese of Newcastle.

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